

## VIRGIL RICHARDS

Interviewers: Jimmy and Dillon

Date: September 29, 2003

Place: Virgil Richards' home

Transcriber: Eleanor Barlow



*Virgil Richards was born on May 22, 1936, in Waldoboro. He has lived in Friendship since 1940, and his family has lived here for four generations. He has five siblings, three children, and three grandchildren. He has been a lobsterman for 42 years, and his grandchildren are his special interest.*

**Q: When did you start lobstering? How long have you been lobstering?**

A: I've been lobstering since 1962 when I got out of the Navy.

**Q: Why did you become a lobsterman?**

A: All my brothers were lobster fisherman, so it was the natural thing to do.

**Q: What is your job on the boat?**

A: My job on the boat is everything. I own the boat and the traps and fish them.

**Q: Do you have someone who lobsters with you, and who is it?**

A: My nephew Dan Wilshire goes with me.

**Q: What does he do?**

A: Baits the traps and measures the lobsters and bands them.

**Q: Is lobstering a tradition in your family?**

A: Yes, it is. . . goes back to my grandfather.

**Q: Describe your lobster boat: length, kind--fiberglass or wood--color, and name of the boat.**

A: I've got a 35-foot fiberglass lobster boat. It's a South Shore 34, it's called, with a Caterpillar diesel, hydraulic hauler, radar, Loran, and a big color machine to show you the bottom, and a lot of equipment that's required by the Coast Guard. The name of the boat is *Still Smokin'*.

**Q: Why did you name it that? Describe your lobster traps.**

A: The reason the boat was named that was more or less a joke between me and Wesley Lash, who built the boat. We thought at the time it was funny. I fish 600 traps: 21-inch traps, 4-foot long, plastic heads in them, three bricks, two big heads, two small heads, plastic vents in them so the little lobsters can get out, and that's about it.

**Q: Describe how you set your traps. How do you know when, where to set them?**

A: As far as setting the traps goes, you set them when you think there's lobsters there, like in the summer when they shed their shells, they get hungry and crawl. And about any other thing you could say is it's something you learn over the years: where to set them, when to set them, how to set them, and when to take them out, dry them so they clean up, when to set them back.

**Q: Do you move them during the season? If so, why and where?**

A: The reason you take your traps up and move them is when there's nothing left there, you put them in deeper water where there are lobsters, and as the weather gets colder and the water gets colder, the lobsters move off shore, and if you want to still go, you have to chase them.

**Q: How often do you haul them?**

A: You haul your traps in the summer when they're crawling every day.

**Q: How do you tell your trap from someone else's?**

A: Everybody has a different color, like mine is yellow and black. Somebody else might have red and green. You have that color, you keep it always.

**Q: Do you use toggles? Explain how they work.**

A: Well, when you got 20 fathoms of water and 40 fathoms of rope, you got to have something to keep it up off the bottom, so you use plastic floats.

**Q: What do you use for bait, and where do you get it?**

A: I use mostly herring, which is caught off shore by O'Hara Bait Co. in Rockland--owns the boats. They go out and get the bait and bring it in and deliver to us. When you don't have herring, you have redfish, pogies, flatfish, racks, and then they have imitation bait--have most anything you want.

**Q: When do you go out? When do you come back? How far do you go in a day? How many traps do you haul in a day?**

A: We usually leave at daylight in the summer, around 4:00. I haul 200 traps, probably go down there seven or eight miles, have different traps in different areas, haul a different area every day.

**Q: Describe what you do when you catch a lobster.**

A: When you catch a lobster, why, you measure it with a measure. If it's okay, you put it in the plug box, and the sternman takes it and checks it over, makes sure it isn't a female that's got a punch, bands the claws so they don't chew each other up, and puts it in the stern.

**Q: Where do you take your lobsters at the end of the day? Who determines the price you get for them?**

A: I sell my lobsters to Bramhall Lobster, have for 20 years. Price is determined by, well, it's supply and demand. If they're scarce, you get big money for them. When they become plentiful, the price goes down.

**Q: Explain how you notch a lobster.**

A: You catch a lobster that's got seed on her or eggs, whatever you want to call it--the second flipper from the right, you take a knife and make a small v-notch in it, and that

shows everybody that nobody can keep it.

**Q: What other kind of fish do you catch in a trap?**

A: Well, you catch flounder, codfish, sculpins--a lot of sculpins. I have caught eels and conch, cunners, cusk, horn pout. Just about anything that's in the water, sooner or later you'll catch one. Lot of them you don't catch because they're small enough they swim right through the meshes on the wire so you would never see them. Pollock, mackerel, herring, stripers. Just about anything: skates, about anything that's going. Caught a lot of skate eggs.

**Q: What is a normal haul for a day?**

A: A normal haul in the summer probably is a couple of hundred pounds. Less in the winter; it fluctuates up and down according to how lobsters are crawling. You get a bad storm, they don't crawl, you don't get that many. On a good day, you do better.

**Q: How does the weather affect your fishing?**

A: Well, you get a lot of bad weather, hurricanes and stuff, you don't get out--why, a lot of them die in the traps. They don't crawl. There's all kinds of different reasons, but bad weather you don't get anywhere near as many as you would good weather.

**Q: How has lobstering changed since you began fishing?**

A: When I started lobstering full time in 1962, everything was wood, and now everything is plastic. A lot different: traps last a lot longer, a lot less maintenance. It's all nylon rope. Back when I started, it was all manilla rope--rot out in a summer. All plastic buoys now; we had all wood when we started. Been made a lot easier. A lot of different electronic equipment that was never heard of. One hundred percent different!

**Q: What do you like most about lobstering?**

A: Well, there's something. . . lobstering is something you were born to. . . if you are born to be a lobsterman. Kids along the coast of Maine were born, brought up to it. Everything they know.

**Q: What do you like least about it?**

A: Well, when you get my age, you love everything about it because you know it's about over, and you hate to give it up.

**Q: What happens when its foggy?**

A: Foggy, I turn my radar on. I have a plotter, and I have all my courses plotted out on it, so all I have to do is follow the arrows. And the radar, turn that on, tell who's around you so you don't run into anybody.

**Q: What kind of problems have you experienced at sea?**

A: Well, we had a hurricane once, and we lost all our traps. Get wound up in a rope and have to get towed in. Have an engine stop. Most anything can happen. Nothing ever happened to me very serious that I ever figured.

**Q: What is the worst thing that ever happened to you while you were lobstering?**

A: I don't think anything ever happened very serious other than a cut on the hand, getting weals from redfish years ago. Everybody gets blood poisoning sooner or later, get a bone in your hand, fall in the boat, hurt your back, something like that, but nothing that a doctor couldn't fix.

**Q: Describe your most memorable time fishing.**

A: I guess probably the single most remembered: I caught a lobster, a blue one that went to the aquarium down in Boston. I don't know if it's still there or not, but they came up and got it. Was really a pretty thing. Caught one once that was all black, had yellow spots all over it. Caught a completely white one once, but they're very rare. Caught one when my grandson (that's doing the interview) was with me that probably weighed 12-14 pounds, full of eggs, that we put back.

**Q: Do you lobster in the winter?**

A: I went lobstering in the winter right up 'til I got old, and now my fingers freeze, so I give it up in November.

**Q: Since you don't lobster in the winter, what do you do in the winter?**

A: In the winter I always buy traps, and we have to rig them, go over all the old traps, take all the buoys off and clean them and paint them. And you have to take the traps and clean them all up and brush them and sometimes put new ropes on, new toggles, whatever they need, new bait lines, and get them ready for next year. It's a never-ending thing.

**Q: How often do you eat lobster?**

A: I don't eat lobster very often. I like lobster stew, fried lobster; I like it in sandwiches, in a salad, but probably eight, ten times a year.

**Q: Thank you for letting us do this interview on you. Maybe we'll have to do it again sometime.**